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ABSTRACT

Rural education should be targeted as a national priority as it affects urban and suburban populations with increasing directness. Policymakers, officials, and education researchers need to examine all existing programs, policies, regulations, and guidelines from the rural schools' point of view. Those elements that inhibit local initiative and collaboration, as well as those that penalize schools for being small or remote, should be refashioned. Anything that does not acknowledge the fact of rural isolation and subsequent difficulties in accessing information about programs and services should be changed. The vulnerability of rural areas to shortages and cutbacks should also be considered. (CMJ)

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THE DOUBLE JEOPARDY OF RURAL SCHOOLS IN THE 1980s

Problems and Potential for Renewal

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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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For rural education, these are the best of times and the worst of times. Times are best because an emerging attitudinal turnaround is directing attention to the part of the nation's educational system that has been the object of a remarkable national neglect for at least six decades, and because promising things are happening locally.[1] It may not be far off the mark to observe that rural education is the happiest place to be in education today, possibly because it has so recently been "discovered" and the tide of enthusiasm for it is new and rising. But times are also worst, because the predictable conditions of the 1980s, whose shortages will bring an inevitable "scaling down", will have greatest impact on those places and populations that had least opportunity to "scale up" when energy was cheap, the GNP increased each year, and the promise of more and better seemed endless. It is no novel assertion to say that the American public is adjusting with difficulty to a late twentieth-century reality: material progress and universal enlightenment are not inevitable. We should not be surprised, then, to hear at times about rural citizens who will not take easily to the notion of having to live with the fact of the prosperity cycle having passed them by. They, too, want a turn at the fount of affluence, and it seems they're not to have it. That is the reality for a fair number of rural communities, whose not-yet-realized blessing may be that in passing them by, material prosperity did not unteach them how to cope when resources are modest. Whether or not the "blessing" is to be realized will depend, in part, on education's leaders and policymakers. It remains to be seen how "enlightened" future policies will be.[2]

For policymakers, the most important things to know about rural education are the size of the rural constituency and the diversity of rural places. Beyond those, the significant matters are the types of conditions that tend to characterize rural communities (although not all conditions are present everywhere):

a greater incidence of poverty than is found elsewhere; a sparse population; small scale and small size; a non-differentiated economic structure; and "traditional" community structures, i.e., small institutions, few hierarchies, and a necessity for individuals to assume multiple roles. All these are features that contrast sharply with the features of modern bureaucratic institutions and urban post-industrial life.

Roughly one-third of the nations school-aged population lives in the non-metropolitan U.S., and roughly one-fifth lives in rural places - so-called because they do not "come up" to the definition of urban places.[3] Every state in the nation has a rural constituency. Eighteen states, in the last census count, were at least forty percent rural in population. Twenty-six states were at least thirty percent rural. Rural schools, by virtue of smaller size (sometimes necessarily so, sometimes by local choice) outnumber urban ones significantly. In fact, using a student population of 1,000 as the dividing line, school districts on the under-side outnumbered those on the over-side by 8,761 to 7,351 in 1977.

Almost one rural school-aged child in twenty is poor. Forty percent of all U.S. poverty is in rural places, and the chances of falling below the poverty line are reputedly 2 1/2 times greater for a rural person than for a metropolitan person.[4] In nonmetro America, the median income was $11,600, compared with $14,910 in metropolitan America in 1975. For rural minorities, the economic situation is more severe: they are the poorest of the poor, the least educated, the least able to find full-time employment, and generally the most vulnerable to shortages and setbacks. Rural children tend to enter school later than others and leave school earlier. They are least likely to enroll in postsecondary institutions or specialized vocational programs, and they have access to fewer educational services and offerings than do metropolitan students.[5]

But there is no such thing as a typical rural person or a typical rural community, a fact that should challenge policymakers to create imaginative and flexible programs and policies, so that rural schools may adapt them to fit local conditions. Unlike his or her popular image, the country dweller is not usually a full-time farmer or rancher; that category includes only five percent of the rural population. The country man or woman may mine coal; cut and haul timber; work for the Forest Service; fish; pick crab meat; pack apples or salmon; drive a school bus; or weave cotton all day, commute eighty miles round trip, and keep a small truck farm on the side. The terrain may or may not be fertile flat farmland or miles of rangeland dotted with Texas Longhorns and Black Angus. It may be the Rocky Mountains, the Alaska range, or the Blue Ridge Mountains. It may be an island off the coast of Maine, South Carolina, or Maryland. It may be an American Indian reservation in New Mexico or Florida. It may be an Eskimo village that is closer to Siberia than to its own state capital, or it may be a Delta community of former tenant farmers who have no jobs because of farm mechanization. The rural community may consist entirely of Appalachian whites, Southern blacks, Aleuts, Navajos, or Hispanics; it may be racially mixed. In other words, the multiple cultures that make up the nation are all represented in the countryside. It is sometimes affluent and comfortable, although that is not usually so.[6] It may have nothing "worse" to contend with than a small, sparse population - not quite poor, but almost - and a proud New England tradition of resisting both help and interference from outsiders; or it may be so desperately poor that it resembles a developing country far more than it resembles Kankakee or Bar Harbor. Rural people often live in trailers and small FHA-financed homes. Some continue to live in tumble-down shacks lacking running water and windowpanes.

Whatever its special character, a rural community is likely not to have benefitted as a rural community from changes that enhanced the material well-being of city dwellers and suburbanites during the greater part of this century. Those things required for advanced forms of industrialization - now acknowledged to be less than entirely desirable - are those things that vary inversely with the character of rural life. For rural America the greatest negative consequence of modernization was loss of wealth and people. Sociologist Daryl Hobbs has offered this observation:

> As described by Bowles and Gintis, education became the 20th-century replacement for Horace Greeley's 19th-century advice for the young man to go West.... The response, according to one estimate, meant the migration of $1 trillion in human capital from rural to urban areas between 1929 and 1969. Considering that during most of this period rural education was paid for almost totally by local property taxes, it is clear that the economic foundations were being laid for what were to become increasing income differentials between rural and urban communities.[7]

During that period of time, opportunities for rural youths were provided through a procedure that guaranteed the decline of many communities: exodus, taken almost as an inevitable accompaniment to the "natural law" of progress. When America was in the process of becoming the world's first industrial power, it required both concentrations of people in cities (where factories were located) and a workforce that had been trained (i.e. "educated") to work for someone else in a hierarchical organization.[8]

Of the two consequences for rural America, one has already been mentioned: the drain of wealth and talent, as the most energetic, best educated rural youth were most likely to follow the "up and out" model of seeking opportunities where opportunities were to be found - in this case "elsewhere," as Sinclair Lewis

knew quite well. The other consequence was equally devastating for numerous rural places, if not moreso in the long run: the transformation of schools into organizations that were structurally the antithesis of small town and rural organizations. One thing fed on another.

Sociologists since Max Weber have been writing about the nature of bureaucracies and speculating about their power to condition human attitudes and perception - in a phrase, to re-create the person. Although merits and effects are much disputed, the essential features of bureaucracies are not: centralized decision-making, hierarchical authority patterns, and increasingly simple forms of specialization as one nears the bottom rung in the hierarchical ladder. As an adjunct to bureaucracies, factories require a workforce able to endure long periods of boredom, to take orders without questioning their merit, to relate to authority structures more than to the natural complexity of people qua people, and to function in a narrowly-defined role. Small communities require the opposite. To the degree that small places thrive - or simply endure - they contain "critical masses" of individuals who can assume multiple roles, feel a sense of familiarity with a variety of human types and ages, find innovative ways to tackle problems and arrange services, and be more entrepreneurial than bureaucratic in outlook. Thus when schools come to resemble the bureaucracies of a mass society more than they resemble the places in which they are physically situated, the chances for the alienation of young people from their origins are substantial.

This situation has happened to a great many rural schools over the past 100 years, especially during the period between World War II and the early 1970s, the period of intensive school consolidation that coincided with three U.S. wars - or more precisely, two wars and a "conflict" that lasted longer than the

wars. Rural males between the ages of about 25 and 60 are likely to have spent time in the armed forces, another bureaucratic organization requiring obedience to authority and acceptance of a limited role for the enlisted man. We do not know the impact of this experience for rural places.

The important points here are that (1) small rural schools supported primarily by local taxes have made an enormous contribution to the country as a whole, particularly to its metropolitan areas, and (2) rather than repaying that debt to rural America, national policies have encouraged the transformation of rural schools into the kinds of institutions that do not fit rural conditions, and they have failed to address the need for policies enabling rural development. Rural people for decades have gone along with the theory that local tax money must be spent to teach their children how to leave home and work for someone else in a large urban organization. Believing in the rhetoric of equal opportunity and "doing right" by their children, they have somewhat selflessly - and somewhat naively - failed to question the implementation of opportunity through the "up and out" model. To save the children, rural communities have often declined and died.

A complex set of relationships among individuals, school, home, community, and the wider society are involved here, but most will be passed over in this essay, which is about schools. The changing role of the rural school, and its potential for revitalizing rural communities, must be closely examined, with particular attention to promising ideas and ongoing experiments and innovations.

One reason for country peoples' strong resistance to school consolidation is that they have not wanted to lose a - sometimes the - central community institution. Lacking the array of institutions for art, adult learning, sport, and civic events that cities have, rural communities have used their schools for

all the above. Schools have also been "meeting houses" where young meet old, where parents meet teachers and principals (and are often one and the same), and where business people, farmers and preachers can swap concerns about the community's health and well being. Without community schools, the chances for these meetings are reduced, and with those missed meetings go opportunities for young people to grow up knowing the people who represent the economic and social institutions of their community.

If they should return - and indeed where they still exist - community schools acting in isolation are unlikely to have the efficacy that they had before World War II. To some extent, the world has changed in irreversible ways; and it simply is not practical to teach students only about their own part of the world. To be effective, learning must begin on that topic,[9] but it must expand to include the larger world outside because students are linked with it, for better or worse. The question for rural education is: Can rural schools use the old basic rural model but modify it so that it meets current needs and contributes to both the individual student's best interests and rural community development? Present evidence - though sparse and scattered - indicates that the answer is yes. Not only can it happen; in some rural communities, it is happening.

Space does not permit a description of even the most promising events of this type, but their essential features can be documented here as indications of what is needed.[10] They are also set forth as hints for policymakers who would like to help rural schools in the 1980s escape the double jeopardy of a past that has ignored and penalized them and a future that is likely to be short on conventional energy sources and domestic social programs. Through local initiatives, a number of rural communities are coping or learning to cope. We argue in this

essay that national policies should support and enable local initiatives, and that there are specifiable procedures for so doing.

Contemporary rural education reforms that look most promising seem predicated on a recognition of some elementary "human truths":

1. As Eliot Wigginton, Foxfire originator, keeps saying, until a students' sense of self-worth has been established, "nothing else (a teacher does) will make any difference."[11] Self-esteem is a necessary but not sufficient condition for both individual and community well being. It occurs for both when actions that make a difference are permitted, acknowledged, and rewarded. It is tied to the growth of competence.

2. No institution in a small place can function effectively as an island. To maximize resources, local institutions must collaborate and form systematic linkages.

3. Development addresses the waste of human potential by providing opportunities for the "under-developed" (including adults) to learn and to participate in meaningful ways.

4. As individuals interact with a variety of other people and with institutions that expand their horizons and help educate them, their range of competencies and understanding expands. Book learning alone will not do it.

5. Small economic enterprises can still be viable enterprises; in some places, they are the only feasible alternative to decline and loss.

Rural communities throughout the country have come upon ways to apply this "wisdom," which is often expressed but too little used in educational policy and practice. Communities in Minnesota and Arkansas have linked - or begun to link - schools and business enterprises to promote local development in sensible ways. Eliot Wigginton's Foxfire concept, a "radical empiricism"[12] that blends the essential components of education through a process of turning students

loose to do real work that makes a difference, has been adopted in at least 150 U.S. communities and in about a dozen foreign settings. Black groups in the deep South and white groups in Appalachia are engaged in community education endeavors that attempt to use networking, coalition building, and public-private sector collaboration to promote economic and other forms of rural development. Small, isolated island schools in Maine, North Carolina and other parts of the country use their own settings as a basis for the curriculum and participate regularly in exchange programs and field trips to the mainland so that they may be able to live in both worlds.

Most of these efforts have explicitly or implicitly acknowledged (1) that local life has value for both learning (curriculum) and living; and (2) that rural students need, more than almost anything else, to learn entrepreneurship. This may not be a conscious revolt against the practice of teaching students how to work for someone else in another place rather than how to create a job or a business for oneself in one's own place; it may be the folk wisdom that intuitively recognizes signs of imminent disaster and acts to avert them. If the latter, it has a remarkable congruence with some of the latest social science wisdom about coping with future scarcity and seems entirely in tune with a sentiment that staff members at the National Rural Center hear being played over and over again as they travel throughout rural America: self-reliance, local initiative, collaboration, tradition, small <u>can be</u> beautiful.

These efforts are responses to past conditions of neglect and future promises of reduced resources; in other words, to challenges that were created by events beyond rural control. The degree to which people behind the efforts have had to overcome serious obstacles created by existing programs, policies, and institutional arrangements should not be underestimated. By and large, Federal education programs since 1965 were designed with metropolitan populations and middle-to-large

schools in mind. The vast array of regulations and reporting requirements, as well as eligibility criteria for some programs and services, discourage minimum participation from rural schools, not to mention new initiatives. Both state and Federal rules and regulations tend to have urban or large school biases. For every reason that a locality finds for attempting an innovation, an SEA or a Federal agency may be able to name ten reasons why it cannot be done or why it can be done only with considerable difficulty over a long period of time. Schools as bureaucratic organizations rather than as local institutions, moreover, have few incentives at this time to collaborate or to create local curricula and foster entrepreneurship as a pervasive part of school learning. It is possible that most "reformed" rural schools may have forgotten the days when things were otherwise.

During the coming year, as a new Department of Education takes shape, a concerted effort needs to occur. Policymakers, officials, and education researchers need to examine all existing programs, policies, regulations, and guidelines from a rural schools point of view. Those elements that inhibit local initiative and collaboration, as well as those that penalize schools for being small and/or remote, should be refashioned. Anything that does not acknowledge the fact of rural isolation, and subsequent difficulties in accessing information about programs and services, should be changed.[13] Anything that fails to take into account the vulnerability of small rural places to shortages and cutbacks should be revised to take that factor into account.[14] In the end, greater flexibility will be required so that rural localities can establish for themselves the particular linkages and collaborative arrangements that suit their circumstances. And in the end, special assistance for remote and very poor schools may be absolutely necessary. It should not be grudged, even in retrenchment eras. It is especially necessary in lean times to assure that the leanest do not wither or starve.

In addition to the humanitarian, or civilized, reasons for supporting vulnerable rural populations, there is a reason so practical that it is superceded by none. All social and economic indicators suggest that rural development will be a worldwide priority for the next several decades. This will be the case particularly for agriculture, and for those parts of the world that are agriculturally fertile or potentially so. The "new movement" in rural education, as well as the reverse migration to the countryside that preceded it,[15] are merely harbingers of things to come, as well as belated recognition of what must happen if our society is to remove rural people from the double jeopardy that confronts them now. (And that confronts us all.) What needs to happen, therefore, seems clear: for the next ten years, rural education should be targeted as a national priority, for it is the sector most pivotal in the education arena, affecting urban and suburban populations with increasing directness.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. It is difficult to choose a precise time when neglect of rural schools became pronounced. 1920 seems a reasonable date to assume the beginning of greater neglect than formerly because the U.S. Census Bureau declared that year that, for the first time in its history, U.S. rural population outranked urban population by about one percent.

2. The question of poverty vs. affluence is, of course, more complex than the official "poverty line" suggests. A farmer may look financially comfortable on paper but be so heavily indebted that little cash is at hand. And many people who are not "officially poor" are barely on the other side of the line and thus extremely vulnerable to setbacks.

3. "Nonmetro" refers to a place with fewer than 50,000 inhabitants and those living nearby. Rural refers to the open countryside, and to places of fewer than 2,500 people that are not near metro areas.

4. Daryl Hobbs. Revitalizing Rural Education: Object or Instrumentality of Rural Development. Paper presented at the National Seminar on Rural Education: College Park, Maryland. May 1979.

5. Frank A. Fratoe. Rural Education and Rural Labor Force in the Seventies. U.S. Department of Agriculture; Economic, Statistics, and Cooperative Service. Rural Development Research Report No. 5; Washington, D.C., 1977.

6. See note 2 above.

7. See Hobbs, p. 2.

8. Jonathan P. Sher, ed. Education in Rural America: A Reassessment of Conventional Wisdom. Westview Press: Boulder, Colorado, 1977. See esp. final chapter.

9. This statement grows from an often repeated "principle" in education that people learn from experience and proceed from concrete to abstract learning - and from a sad condition of much rural schooling: that children study geography books about Afghanistan and South Africa while knowing nothing of their own locality's history, governance, or services.

10. For a brief overview of selected rural education efforts, see the forthcoming issue of PTA TODAY (December 1979 - January 1980), which focuses on rural education.

11. See Eliot Wigginton. Moments. Kennebunk, Maine. Star Press, Inc. 1975.

12. David Shapiro. "Recovering a Sense of Past and Place," Saturday Review of Literature. April 29, 1972. P. 36.

13. For a discussion of missing and needed information for and about rural education, see Gail A. Parks and Jonathan P. Sher. Imaginary Gardens? Real Problems: An Analysis of Federal Information Sources on Rural Education. ERIC/CRESS: Las Cruces, New Mexico. March 1979.

14. Distance and sparsity are obvious problems. The lack of infrastructures in rural places to support the alleviation of poverty may, however, be a more serious problem.

15. See Calvin L. Beale: The Revival of Population Growth in Nonmetropolitan America. U.S. Department of Agriculture; Economic, Statistics, and Cooperative Services: Washington, D.C. 1975.